

Cloquet Fire 1918 Holocaust in Normanna

Written by George Cooke, Jr. **told by** Harry Rusdahl

Reprinted from the November, 1968 "The Landmarks" a former monthly community newsletter sponsored by the Clover Valley Community Council. Resident Helen Hendrickson, who was part of the Landmarks group, was reminded of this article after the fires in Northern Minnesota this year).

The following account of the Cloquet fire as it came into our area was told to George Cooke, Jr. by Harry Rusdahl who resides on the Pioneer Road in the original house which was built with the aid of the Red Cross after the fire. (Note: it still exists in 2011).

On the hot, blustery and dry day of October 12, 1918, the community of Normanna was holding its annual country fair at the Johnson School on the Normanna Road. Many of the township's people were there displaying their garden produce, while some of the men were at home preparing for the winter ahead.

The smell of smoke was evident and the smoke from the fire to the west seemed to cover the sun with haze. As the fire swept eastward across the Jean Duluth Road and into the town of Normanna, the men at home went to help fight it, while word was sent to the school for help and warning the people to go home and help save their buildings. The men went to the west of the George H. Cooke homestead attempting to stop the fire but with winds exceeding 60 miles per hour pushing the fire eastward, they saw their efforts were futile. They then returned to their own homes hoping to save some of their possessions.

When Harry Rusdahl returned home he found the barn afire but his house was still standing. His sister and invalid brother had fled in a horse-drawn wagon to the William Johnson home about 3/4 mile to the east. The Johnson home was in a valley surrounded by steep hills and seemed the safest place in the area. The people to the west drove their cattle and what belongings they could carry to the Johnson's and at times their clothes started to burn from sparks showered on them by the high winds.

The men and boys continued to work into the night but with little effect. However around midnight, the wind shifted to the east bringing heavy lake air and fog into the burning area and the fire died down but by then much damage had been done. Seemingly there was no loss of life in this area among the people or domestic animals.

On returning to his home, Harry Rusdahl found everything in ashes and winter just ahead. His sister moved to Duluth and he and his brother spent the winter at the Jonas Peterson farm on the Normanna Road, west and north of the Jean Duluth Road.

Spring came, and so did help! The Red Cross supplied lumber and materials to Harry and a number of other people in the area so they might build a shelter and move back to their Property. This particular house was built in April of 1919, and to most old-timers' knowledge, is the only one remaining intact today.